

## UPDATE REPORT

# SOUTH ASIAN TSUNAMI: U.S. MILITARY PROVIDES 'LOGISTICAL BACKBONE' FOR RELIEF OPERATION

Ralph A. Cossa



*"The military role is to provide its unique capabilities and significant capacity to provide immediate relief and save lives."*

*Photo above: Banda Aceh, Indonesia -- Navy Lieutenant Shawn Harris of the USS Shoup carries an Indonesian boy to emergency medical treatment facilities at the Banda Aceh airport in January. Emergency relief operations continued around the clock for the victims of the December 26, 2004, earthquake and tsunami that struck 12 nations across the Indian Ocean region. (© AP/WWP)*

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This simple sentence, by Admiral Thomas Fargo, commander of the U.S. Pacific Command, sums up the very complicated mission undertaken by U.S. forces in response to the horrific December 26, 2004, earthquake and tsunami that left some 300,000 people dead or missing, with upwards of a million more displaced, in 11 South and Southeast Asian nations and Africa. As devastating as the damage was, it could have been much worse, if it had not been for the rapid response by the international community. While many countries participated and the U.S. Defense Department has deliberately played down its central role in the humanitarian relief efforts, pointing first and foremost to the various host nations and their military and civilian relief efforts, the U.S. military's "unique capabilities and significant capacity" provided life-saving relief, and hope, to countless tens of thousands.

At the height of the relief effort, some 16,000 U.S. military personnel were deployed throughout the areas most affected by the tragedy. More than two dozen U.S. ships (including an aircraft carrier battle group, a Marine amphibious group, and the hospital ship USNS Mercy, which remained after the main Naval forces departed) and over 100 aircraft were dedicated to the disaster relief effort at an estimated cost of some \$5 million a day. Those costs are part of the \$346 million the U.S. spent for immediate relief. On February 9 President Bush announced an additional commitment of more than \$600 million, bringing the total actual and pledged U.S. government aid to \$950 million. In addition, substantial donations of roughly \$700 million, and still growing, have been raised through efforts spearheaded by former Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton from corporate, institutional and personal American contributions.

Significantly important in the U.S. military support was the availability of almost 60 U.S. helicopters, which flew over 2,200 missions, shuttling relief supplies from U.S. ships and other staging areas to hard-hit towns and villages. U.S. fixed-wing aircraft, mostly C-130 and C-17 cargo aircraft, flew another 1,300 plus missions shuttling much-



*Banda Aceh, Indonesia -- Navy crewmen from the USS Abraham Lincoln load relief supplies for survivors of the December 26 earthquake and tsunami onto a Sea Hawk helicopter at the Banda Aceh airport during humanitarian relief operations in January. (© AP/WWP)*

needed relief supplies and equipment into and throughout the affected regions. In Indonesia, which bore the brunt of the damage, the first fresh water many survivors saw was delivered by U.S. military units that rushed to the region even before the full extent of the damage was known. All told, through mid-February the U.S. military had delivered over 24 million pounds of relief supplies and equipment.

Six Maritime Preposition Ships from Guam and Diego Garcia also were dispatched to the area to provide critical drinking water: each can store about 90,000 gallons of fresh water and is capable of producing 36,000 gallons daily. Adequate fresh water supplies helped prevent widely-predicted, but largely avoided, outbreaks of malaria and other diseases.

American ambassadors in the stricken countries immediately offered financial and technical assistance and called upon U.S. military and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) experts to begin assessing the damage. U.S. ships were given orders to begin deploying to the region within hours of the tragedy — well before the extent of devastation was clear or any government had officially requested their assistance — in order to be there if and when called upon. Within 24 hours, U.S. Navy P-3 Orion reconnaissance aircraft began flying missions over the affected areas to help assist in the search and rescue effort and to assess the extent of the damage. This, despite the fact that U.S. military forces continue to be severely over-extended and many had seen recent duty in Iraq. (The forces, rather than complaining, willingly and eagerly came to the rescue, despite in some cases having their holiday rest and recovery curtailed.)

## COMMAND AND CONTROL

While the numbers of forces dedicated to the relief effort and the extent of aid they provided were impressive, the most invaluable U.S. contribution focused around another Defense Department unique capability: command, control, communications, and coordination. These attributes, critical in wartime, proved equally critical in ensuring an effective, coordinated response.

Within 48 hours of the tragedy, with news reports still estimating that “20,000 people are feared dead,” the U.S. Pacific Command was already establishing a joint task force to coordinate and conduct humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations. Access approval was requested, and quickly obtained, from the Thai government to allow its massive Utapao Air Base to serve as the regional hub for the relief effort. Meanwhile, U.S. defense attaches were arranging overflight and landing rights and making initial contacts to allow U.S. forces, if and when authorized to assist, to more effectively interact with their regional counterparts. As Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz subsequently testified, “the ability of the Department of Defense to respond so quickly would not have been possible without the relationships developed over many years with the militaries of countries in the region, particularly with Thailand.” The *joint* force (denoting the involvement of more than one military service) quickly became a *combined* force as other militaries became involved in the coordination effort. The *task* force also transformed into a non-doctrinal, *support* force.

Three days after the tsunami struck, Combined Support Force 536, under the command of Marine Corps Lieutenant General Robert Blackman (who also commands the Third Marine Expeditionary Force in Okinawa), was already playing a key role in coordinating the U.S. and initial international effort. Most notably, CSF 536 worked closely with U.S. embassies and with USAID field elements, including deployed USAID Disaster Assistance Response Teams (DARTs) to ensure a seamless U.S. response. While Washington bureaucracies are not famous for their ability to work effectively with one another, USAID Administrator Andrew Natsios praised the “effective coordination mechanisms, from the tactical field level all the way up to the strategic headquarters level.” Cooperation between DOD and USAID brought “the capabilities and expertise of each into an effective partnership,” according to Natsios.

The CSF 536’s Combined Coordination Center (CCC) at Utapao quickly became the heart of the coordinated

international relief effort, with liaison officers from Australia, Britain, Japan, Thailand, and Singapore, along with a Civil-Military Coordination Cell, USAID DART representatives, and a local official from the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). They met several times a day to coordinate their respective national and institutional efforts. This provided an essential element of on-scene coordination that helped to avoid duplication of effort and facilitated accurate assessments of the extent of the damage and identification of the areas most in need of assistance. The CSF's CCC also helped facilitate the efforts of the international "Core Group" (involving the U.S., Australia, Japan, India, Canada, and others) that was established to coordinate the first stages of the international relief effort, identify and fill gaps, and avoid or break logistical bottlenecks, until the United Nations was able to mobilize and play a more central role in the relief response.

The relief operations also demonstrated the merits of the Pacific Command's Asia Pacific Area Network (APAN). The APAN mission is to share unclassified information electronically in order to facilitate regional understanding, build confidence among Asia-Pacific neighbors and enhance security cooperation. APAN was used extensively by Britain, Canada, Australia and the affected Asian nations while coordinating relief efforts.

In order to more effectively support the multi-nation relief effort, CSF 536 established Combined Support Groups (CSGs) in Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Aceh, Indonesia, headed by one-star officers, to coordinate with local agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and to coordinate the efforts of their own Disaster Relief Assessment Teams and USAID's DARTs. The CSGs were designed "to minimize loss of life and mitigate human suffering, while the resources of other U.S. government agencies, NGOs, and international and regional organizations were brought to bear in the affected areas." They were there to "support host nation-led efforts," but in most instances provided invaluable managerial and coordinating expertise that might otherwise have gone lacking, while augmenting overstretched local assets. Under Secretary of State Alan Larson, in describing the Pacific Command's on-scene efforts, praised "the remarkable things they accomplished to establish the logistical backbone for the entire relief operation and to facilitate to work of the United Nations, NGOs, and other donors."

U.S. military personnel, in every instance, worked closely with their local military counterparts, in some

cases overcoming years of suspicion, and once again demonstrating the value of routinizing military-to-military contacts to allow for more effective cooperation during periods of crisis. As Admiral Fargo noted, "one of the reasons [we] have been able to respond effectively is because we have established these habits of cooperation together over many years ... we have built strong partnerships and standard operating procedures and when this disaster occurred we were able to reach back and put those into effect."

## A HISTORY OF HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

The U.S. military is, of course, no stranger to disaster relief operations. One sterling example of prior disaster relief assistance was the mid-ocean diversion of the U.S. First Marine Expeditionary Force returning home after DESERT STORM in 1991 to assist Bangladesh in the wake of a typhoon that killed over 130,000 people. Plans for that operation were literally drafted on-the-go as the marines were rushing into the Bay of Bengal to provide emergency relief. While the operation was deemed a huge success — the rapid U.S. response was credited with saving the lives of thousands of Bangladeshis — it underscored the need for better coordination and advance preparation. Since then, the Pacific Command has put great emphasis on developing its crisis response capabilities, to include its Military Planning Augmentation Team (MPAT) program, which has created a cadre of professionals who are accustomed to working together on a multinational basis to respond to crisis. As Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz observed, "MPAT experience was put to good use in response to the tsunami crisis."

CSF 536 operations have now drawn to a close. As the immediate emergency effort draws down and the baton is passed to the affected governments and international relief agencies, led by the United Nations, a lengthy reconstruction phase will now get into full swing. As Fargo has noted, "this work can [be] and is done more efficiently by professional relief agencies." However, some U.S. forces, including the hospital ship *Mercy*, remain on the scene. Meanwhile, despite the overwhelming success of the relief effort, U.S. military planners, with their State Department, USAID, and other counterparts are already examining how things can be done even better the next time that tragedy strikes.■

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